

Oedipus, Prince of Denmark?

By Sierra M.

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, has many problems: his father is murdered, his inheritance is stolen, his love goes insane, his friends are treacherous, and his stepfather is his uncle. He sees ghosts, contemplates suicide, and murders a man (or two) before the play's end. But, Prince Hamlet does *not* have an Oedipus complex; the play, as it is written, presents no evidence to show that Hamlet had an abnormal attraction to his mother. Based upon the reactions of early critics to the play, the speeches of Hamlet throughout the play, and the loathing Hamlet harbors towards incest, there is actually a great deal of evidence to support the contrary—that Hamlet is a typical son who mourns his father's death at his uncle's hand.

“Hamlet has inspired more critical writing than any other work of Western literature” (“Hamlet” 71)—but the earliest critics of Shakespeare's tragedy make no mention of so strange a dilemma as an Oedipus complex. Its first critical review came “sometime after 1598” with Gabriel Harvey. “Harvey indicated that soon after its first performance the drama was known for its intellectual appeal” (“Hamlet” 71). During the 18th century, critics focused primarily on Ophelia's faults and the downfalls of the “To be or not to be” speech. Romantics then pondered Hamlet's madness [written at eastern alamance hs in 05] and sentimentalized his character. It is not until the early twentieth century that the idea of an abnormal amount of feeling between mother and son—an Oedipus complex—is introduced by Sigmund Freud. Freud's Hamlet must repress affection for his mother, which Freud claims accounts for his hesitation to kill his uncle, Claudius (Freud 119). Those critics who came first on the scene, however, made no mention of

such a complex, which can reasonably lead one to believe that there was, originally, no such thing in the tragedy. (“Hamlet” 71, 72)

Even based upon Hamlet’s most impassioned speeches, which he makes throughout the play, the existence of his supposed complex may again be doubted. For example, the speech that the tragic hero utters when first we find him alone is comprised of lines speaking on the love and marriage of his mother and father—and never once an innuendo concerning love between his mother and himself. “Why, she would hang on him as if increase of appetite had grown by what it fed on,” he comments, referring to his mother’s dotage upon his father (I.ii.149-151). “All his life he had believed in her, we may be sure, as such a son would. He had seen her not merely devoted to his father, but hanging on him like a newly-wedded bride” (Bradley 123). He here also compares his mother to a “beast” while comparing his father to his uncle in astonishment of his mother’s choice of groom (I.ii.156-159). And, later, he confronts his mother with his astonishment in her bedroom. This bedroom scene is one of the most controversial in the questions surrounding the relationship of Hamlet to his mother, yet there is little reason within it to presume that Hamlet feels anything but filial love towards Gertrude. Indeed, it was his mother who called for the meeting in the first place, that she could scold him for upsetting his uncle. And so, he begins with a simple question: “Now, mother, what’s the matter?” (III.iv.9) From there, he accuses her bluntly [written at eastern alamance hs in 05] of offending his father and questioning “with a wicked tongue” (III.iv.13). In fact, the whole of the interview is Hamlet recounting to the queen her sins against his dead father—never against himself. He ends by pleading for her repentance, bidding her to “throw away the worsser part of [her heart], and live the purer with the other half” (III.iv.178-179). These are not the words of a sick son—a loving and a caring one, yes, but not an Oedipus. He then bids the queen good night, four times—but

this is accounted for upon his recollection of a few small details or instructions for his mother concerning Claudius. If there is any abnormality in the confrontation, it is that Hamlet is less like a son and more like a lawyer in his accusations—but nowhere does he hint that his mother is anything but a mother to him. His passionate speech to her is spurred by his concern for her soul: “Confess yourself to heaven; repent what’s past; avoid what is to come” (III.iv.170-171). Even his last words to his mother, already dead, in the last act, reflect pity or scorn rather than repressed desire: “Wretched queen, adieu!” quoth Hamlet, and he dwells no more upon her sudden death (V.ii.354). On the other hand [written at eastern alamance hs in 05] stands Ophelia. “Ophelia was a modest young [virgin], beloved by Hamlet” (Drake 73). Alas for poor Prince Hamlet, she is already dead by the end of the play; but, it cannot be overlooked that Hamlet declares his love for Ophelia upon her grave (V.i.270). If he loves Ophelia, he need not love his mother in the same way. Therefore, if his own speech is investigated, it can be concluded that the Freudian Hamlet does not exist in Shakespeare’s play.

If Hamlet *were* another Oedipus, as suggested by Freud, it would be an incestuous act—and if Hamlet condemned incest once, he condemned it a thousand times to perdition. “That his mother’s marriage was considered incest made his initial disturbance seem more rational than it does now” (Empson 206). His first mention of the word comes in his first soliloquy, as he speaks on the haste with which his mother married his uncle—and the reference is immediately followed by, “It is not, nor it cannot come to good” (I.ii.164). He obviously realizes that inter-familial relationships are uncouth. Nor is this the last mention made of his mother and his uncle’s tainted relationship; in the prayer scene, as he contemplates the best time to kill his uncle, he concludes that one of his best options, in order to condemn the man to eternity in hell, is to strike him “in the incestuous pleasure of his bed”—counting incest, again, as a sin (III.iv.93). His

final, and most passionate, declaration of the evils of incest comes as he dies, and kills his uncle with him. “Here, thou incestuous, murd’rous, damned Dane, drink off this potion!” he declares, pouring the poisoned drink down his uncle’s throat (V.ii.345-346). To group incest with murder and damnation does not imply that Hamlet was keen on the practice; rather, it shows that he loathed it, feeling no pity for his dying uncle or his eternal fate. He never empathizes with his uncle, never makes light of his crime. Always, when Hamlet describes his uncle’s relationship to his mother, he combines [written at eastern alamanca hs in 05] the commission of incest with wrongdoing; it cannot be supposed that a man with such a strong view on the subject would ever contemplate compromising that view, and so Hamlet the Dane cannot be thought to have any sort of Oedipus complex.

In light of the evidence piled against a Freudian Hamlet, including its lack of mention by early critics, Hamlet’s own speeches, and his abhorrence for the sin of incest, it must follow that the very idea be neglected altogether. There is simply no need for such an internal conflict to exist. The young Prince Hamlet has plenty of other troubles to occupy his time, including madness, adultery, and murder. *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* requires no intrigue beyond what the author purposed, for it has already been placed among the greatest of history’s tragic stories

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